

Religion and the Schools

An Address

By



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American democracy will never be defeated by enemies from the outside unless it has first been sufficiently weakened from within. To the extent that it has faith in its own principles and lives up to its own standards it is invincible. Its adversaries are well aware of this and are obliged to pretend that they, too, are democratic. Only so can they win the people's confidence. This, as we all know, is the approach of the communists. By professing a deeper devotion than others to democratic aims they gain the power to destroy democracy. But they are not alone in this expedient. There are those who would use the threat of communism to persuade us to defend democracy by giving up its substance to maintain its shadow. These are our inside enemies and they are very dangerous.

They would, however, have very little power to harm us if we understood the way they go about their business. A nation is not undermined by obvious and con-

spicuous acts of treason. There need not even be deliberate treachery. All that is necessary is for segments of the population to seek their own advantage without regard to the effect upon the general welfare.

That is why it is so regrettable that many who are democratic in intention have allowed themselves to be misled by false appraisals of our situation. They fear that democracy is insufficient in its spiritual resources. What is needed is its reinforcement by sectarian religion. Especially is this necessary, they think, in the education of our children. What the churches cannot convey in the voluntary classes of the Sunday school must be transmitted to a quasi-captive audience in the day school. This will improve character and foster good citizenship—and at the same time, perhaps, increase the membership of churches. Or, at any rate, that is the hope.

Unfortunately, however, what such a plan will really achieve, if it is persisted in, is the undermining of democracy and a favored position for the Roman Catholic Church. Since this, apparently, is not at once perceived, even by Americans of sincerely democratic faith, it may be well to ask some questions rather than to state a case.

First of all, what is the purpose of a school, any sort of school, sectarian or secular? This is not difficult to answer, and requires, I think, but little theorizing. The purpose of a school is twofold: to teach the knowledge and skills which fit the individual to maintain himself in a given society, and to encourage the attitudes and outlook which conform to the aims of that society. It would be possible, of course, to supply a much more complicated definition, but it is not necessary to be complicated in order to be comprehensive.

State Support?

Let us apply this definition to two kinds of schools, parochial and public. As to the first of the purposes, the teaching of knowledge and skills, we are told that the two kinds of schools are equivalent. It is on this basis that the Catholic hierarchy demands state support for Catholic education. The parochial schools, it is claimed, perform the same functions as the public schools and should not be penalized because religious teaching is added. But this is a contradictory claim. Pope Pius XI, quoting with approval a statement by a previous pope, Leo XIII, reminds the faithful that "it is necessary not only that religious instruction be given to the young at certain fixed times, but also that

every other subject taught be permeated with Christian piety." If this is not done, he continues, "little good can be expected from any kind of learning, and considerable harm will often be the consequence." In parochial schools, therefore, religious teaching is not so much added as interfused.

We thus see that from the Catholic viewpoint the first of the purposes of a school, the teaching of knowledge and skills, is inseparable from the second purpose, the encouragement of attitudes and outlook which conform to the aims of a particular society. We also see that the society to whose aims the student is intended to conform is primarily the Roman Catholic Church which has permeated all that has been taught him with its own particular piety.

This was well understood by Mr. Justice Jackson, who stated in a Supreme Court opinion that the "growth and cohesion, discipline and loyalty" of the Catholic Church "spring from its schools" and that "Catholic education is the rock on which the whole structure rests." (*Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 US 1, 24.)

Let us come now to the public school. Beyond teaching the knowledge and skills which are needed by the individual to maintain himself in a modern community, it is generally conceded that the public school, in one degree or another, will acquaint him with the elements of contemporary culture, but it is denied that he is given anything which supplies the place of what a Catholic student gets to guide him spiritually. It is for this reason that some of the Protestant clergy are so anxious to carry the churches into the schools. They want to provide what they think is lacking.

Educational Goals

But are they right in their assumption? Or have they not failed to notice that the parochial school prepares its students, insofar as it is able, for life in an *exclusive* society ruled by authoritarian principles, namely, the Catholic Church; whereas the public school prepares its students for life in an *inclusive* society, based on democratic principles, namely the American Republic. What the public school does, and does extremely well, is encourage the attitudes and outlook which promote tolerance and cooperation so that diversity shall be undergirded with unity—the sort of unity without which no democratic society can long endure.

It is not true that the public school gives its students nothing spiritual. Democracy is based upon spir-

itual principles and the public schools not only teach these principles but largely practice them. It is a spiritual principle that human rights are universal and that all are entitled to equal consideration, and the public schools make manifest this principle; it is a spiritual principle that all men are brothers, irrespective of where they come from or what they believe, and the public schools are founded on this principle. Except where racial segregation transgresses democratic standards, the public school is open to all the children of the community. They are invited to discover in experience the tolerance and good will, the benevolence and sympathy, with which a democratic society dismisses prejudice and dissolves the barriers of antipathy. They learn the rules of fair play, and to be open-minded and honest in their viewpoint, and to have a decent respect for diverse opinions.

All this is spiritual. I am not saying that it is the whole of religion. But if doing unto others as you would that they should do unto you is a valid summary of religious ethics—as Jesus indicated that it was—the public school is not deficient in the teaching of it. As to religious doctrine, the place for that is surely in the churches. If a Protestant says otherwise, demanding that the teachings of the various denominations be injected into public schools, it matters very little whether the “released time” is spent on school premises or somewhere else: he has conceded the contention of the Roman Catholic Church.

Fatal Concession

Let that be made a little plainer. In what way has he conceded it? He has agreed that the claims of a church to participate in the weekday education of children must be allowed by the community. He has agreed that the principles of democracy are not sufficient for spiritual nurture in the public schools. He has agreed that unity, which is promoted by excluding sectarianism from the public school, is subordinate to the interests of churches. With these three concessions made by Protestants, the Roman Catholic hierarchy can demolish the entire case for the separation of church and state.

Let us spell it out still further. It is but a step from the participation of churches in public school education to the participation of the state in parochial education—which means tax money for the Catholic schools. It is but a step from admitting—and, as I have shown, falsely—that the public school is spir-

itually inadequate to acknowledging the right of the Roman Church to provide for the children of Catholics, at state expense, schools which (from the Catholic standpoint) are *not* inadequate. For if Protestants would supply a deficiency in a Protestant way, there is no impressive reason why Catholics should not supply it in a Catholic way. And finally, after admitting that democratic unity is less important than the sectarian claims of churches, it is but a step to accepting the entire Catholic position that the church must everywhere be dominant.

It is easy to see, then, what "released time" will do for Roman Catholicism. But what will it do for American Protestants? There is not a shred of evidence from the record to date that it has done anything whatever which compensates for the damaging emphasis on sectarianism which it has injected into the schools, or even anything that justifies the extravagant waste of time while teachers obey orders to teach "nothing significant" to the students who will not take sectarian instruction, so that sectarian students will not suffer academic disadvantage. Such studies as have been made of the plan in operation indicate that more problems have been created than solved. Examples are child truancy, teacher intimidation, failure of the churches to maintain teaching staffs, resistance of children to incompetent instruction, and, most conspicuously, the inability of public school staffs to enforce discipline on "released time" because of the confusion arising from conflict between the wishes of the clergy and the restrictions imposed by the law. In some cases, decisions of the Supreme Court have been flouted, a defiance which can do very little, it would seem, to improve either the morality or the citizenship of the children who are forced to disobey the Nation's highest tribunal.

By Their Fruits

As to the improvement in character which religious instruction was expected to induce, there are no indications of it. This should have been expected, since there is not a shred of evidence that even those schools which are run entirely by churches, the parochial schools, produce citizens of better character than are graduated from the public schools. The Roman Catholic Church, I think, would find it rather difficult—even embarrassing, perhaps—to try to show that the parochial school has given us citizens who are more honest than others, or persons in positions of public

trust who are more free from corruption than those who have not had the benefit of Catholic piety. And yet, according to the New Testament, "by their fruits ye shall know them." It would not be advisable, however, for Protestants—or, for that matter, persons who belong to no church whatever—to suppose that Catholic instruction is peculiarly corrupting.

The truth appears to be that character is more influenced by home and family and by social and economic conditions than it is by catechism. This may be regrettable, but, if true, must be faced. And one consequence of facing it is to realize that "released time," whatever it may do for Protestant doctrine, is unlikely to improve our national ethics. What it surely *will* do is accentuate sectarian differences precisely at the time when what we need is democratic unity.

It would be a salutary thing for all of us if, in this matter, we would go back and learn what the Founding Fathers intended by the separation of church and state. Catholics have been trying to rewrite this phase of our history to give it an aspect more favorable to their aims. And too many Protestants, for reasons of their own, are willing to be misinformed. They are taking greater chances than they recognize.

Father Wilfred Parsons, for instance, in his book, *The First Freedom: Considerations on Church and State in the United States*, tells us that Jefferson, because he was in France at the time, "had almost nothing to do with the First Amendment," and that Madison, who had a great deal to do with it, believed in the absolute separation of church and state as a personal conviction but that as a statesman he believed only in "distinction and cooperation." All that Madison opposed was the establishment of a national religion by the Federal Government. He did not intend a "wall of separation," but only "distinction and cooperation." This is a very interesting interpretation.

Jefferson's Principle

Well, what are the facts? As to Jefferson, the fact is that long before he went to France he had made indubitably clear that by "the separation of church and state" he meant *separation*, and this is what he continued to mean, to the end of his life. In 1786, his famous Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom was adopted as law in Virginia. His equally famous statement, "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," was uttered in response to an attack upon

him by orthodox clergy who wanted a tax-supported church. He knew, as others of the Founding Fathers knew, that if the persecutions and the bloody religious wars of the Old World were to be avoided in the New, church and state must be separate. He knew that it was the only way to avert religious tyranny, and that "distinction and cooperation" could never be enough; it must be separation. It is inconceivable that Jefferson would approve the injection of sectarian teaching into American public education. It would be utterly repugnant to him.

As to Madison, who had so much to do with the First Amendment, it was he who fought unceasingly in the Legislature of Virginia against the campaign—a very persistent one—for annual contributions to the churches—not just to one church, but divided among all of them. He asked who was to decide, then and in the future, which churches were Christian, and wondered why there should be no similar support for Hindus, if they came to Virginia, or for Mohammedans. Since Patrick Henry was the leader of the group who wanted churches aided by taxation, it was contrived by Madison, aided now by Jefferson, to get him out of the Assembly and have him elected governor. When the Assembly tried to change the bill so that it would provide a levy, not for churches but for religious teachers, Madison said that although the matter might seem trivial to some, the amount involved being small, there could be no compromise, for once started in that direction the "ultimate consequence" would be "the denial of liberty and imposition of clerical control upon the state." "It is proper," he said, "to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties."

No Way Back

Let not Protestants be deceived! The Catholic intention is what Madison feared—though at that time from other quarters—"the imposition of clerical control upon the state." Instead of assisting this intention through such ill-advised proposals as "released time" for sectarian instruction, they should "take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties." They should recognize that "released time" is itself such an "experiment." It is a disguised attempt to coerce the children of our public schools into accepting, under school discipline, religious instruction on weekdays which they find unattractive on Sundays. If it were otherwise, Sunday would be sufficient, or one of the weekday evenings. In any case, managed by Protestants,

even if it were sanctioned by law, it would surely fail. It is too late now for Protestants to do what they could not succeed in doing a century ago, when Horace Mann and others rescued the school from sectarianism and established it on democratic and inclusive principles. This is the only way in America for those who believe in liberty and national unity. For Protestants—and it is not a misfortune; it is very fortunate—there is no way back.

But if Protestants open the way, though they themselves will not be able to travel it, the Catholics will have no difficulty in traveling it to the very end. Their basis is not freedom, but the authoritarian principle. They would be successful where the Protestants would fail. Everything will then be under what Pope Pius called "the maternal supervision of the Church," whose mission is not only to her own faithful but "extends equally to those outside the Fold" . . . for the right to educate belongs "pre-eminently to the Church."

Let preachers who believe in the hard-won liberties that came with the Reformation and through the American Revolution and the wise provisions of the Founding Fathers turn—not to the public schools—but to their own church schools and to their pulpits. There is much to be done. America needs religion. Let it be preached, let it be taught, let it be practiced. But while each of us goes his own way to the church of his choice, free to worship as he will and to declare his faith and to persuade others, let all of us together remember that democracy unites us in a spiritual community, and that we are citizens of one country just as we are children of one God. Let us not disdain our heritage. There is a faith within democracy drawn from the best in all religions. It is faith in the victory of truth in free and open encounter, and in the triumph of liberty over servitude, and of the universal over the provincial, and of brotherhood over exclusiveness, and love over fear. Whatever may separate us in conviction, ritual, or devotion, let this unite us. Without it we are lost—and so is the hope of the world.

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